



NEPA

Shortly after signing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) into law on New Year's Day in 1970, President Richard Nixon discussed it in his State of the Union Address:

"The great question...is shall we make peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, our land and our water? Restoring nature is a cause beyond parties and beyond factions; it is a common cause...Clean air, clean water, open spaces – these should once again be the birthright of every American...The price tag is high; through our years of past carelessness, we have incurred a debt to nature; now that debt is being called."

Forty-three years later, that price tag is even higher; some old problems remain; and daunting new environmental challenges loom. Still, NEPA's impact is unquestionable. Interpreted, expanded and enhanced over four+ decades, it remains the nation's environmental guide star. NEPA fundamentally and forever changed the way America grows and builds itself.

At Georgia's Department of Transportation – the entity responsible for more earth work in this state than any other – NEPA has a huge impact on how we go about planning, designing and building transportation infrastructure. Virtually everything we do begins with what we call "complying with the NEPA process."

The scope of that process is broad and complex; we must:

- Protect water quality, air quality, endangered plant and animal species and their habitats, migratory birds, wetlands, streams, rivers, harbors, floodplains, farmlands and the soil itself;
- Preserve historic and culturally significant buildings and places;
- Save archaeologically significant resources;
- Guard against noise pollution;
- Make certain native peoples and the disadvantaged are treated equitably;
- Mitigate for unavoidable impacts; and always,
- Engage the public in our decision-making process.

To do this requires a considerable investment in time, staff and money. Making a project NEPA compliant sometimes requires re-routing; re-locating cemeteries and historic structures; and archaeological "digs" to recover important artifacts. We create or improve wetlands and streams to mitigate for like areas that need to be altered. And we work with affected residents to help offset impacts to their neighborhoods and lives.

Recently, the need to study areas of North Georgia for the presence of the endangered Indiana and Gray bats has garnered attention. Such examination simply is part of a process we are required by law to routinely undertake for numerous plant and animal species – be they cuddly or creepy.

We certainly understand that with as many as 700 projects ongoing at any time, not everyone is always going to be satisfied. Our foremost mission after all is to help make those 700 projects realities – to keep motorists safe and moving on our transportation network – and to grow that network as Georgia grows.

But meeting our transportation needs and protecting our environment are not mutually exclusive objectives; doing both does not have to be a contentious, adversarial struggle. Working together – internally, with partner agencies, businesses, local governments and citizens – we can repay our debt to nature; have a world-class transportation system; and preserve the beauty and many wonders of Georgia for generations to come.

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